

## GOOD NIGHT MR. LEWIS

### The Meatball Shop's Michael Chernow on Expanding to Bburg & the West Village

By [Steve Lewis](#)

September 09, 2011



Fashion's Night Out downtown was a lot like Halloween, with a zillion people on the street, but with everyone wearing the same costume: fashion (victim). And it's not nearly as much fun as Oktoberfest. We tried to visit the Chanel store but one of the Kardashians was apparently nearby and there was a huge mob. We stopped by [Opening Ceremony](#) where another, better dressed mob mobbed Sarah Jessica Parker and Dwyane Wade and a cornucopia of other celebs.



We headed east, as we always do when things get confusing, and kissed Codie at the door of Patricia Field, which was mobbed with young shoppers. With her advice we headed to the soon-to-be Veselka Bowery on East 1st Street for "the party." There we saw Pat and Susanne Bartsch and Sushi and Maripol. Maripol was showing a video of the opening night of the Palladium the second time I was brought in to fill it. I didn't know the video existed. That night, we blocked 14th Street entirely and put a little more than 14,000 people through the building. We supposedly turned away another 20,000...and we had a tough door. That was a different era.



Anyway, Veselka, which I was told is opening in the Spring, looked pretty drab except for the art of various friends of Field. I was stunned to exhilaration by the work of Richard Alvarez and wondered where he was. He didn't return my texts and unfortunately I remembered too late that last night was the seasonal reopening of my favorite place that isn't Lit. Submercer opened with a bang last night and I missed it. Gabby scolded me as she checked her messages at 9am just before she crashed. Nightlife has long hours. If you're looking for me just stake out the place as I try to pass by every night to visit Gabby, Richard Alvarez, and the superb staff at the hidden gem of the Balazs empire. It's still that good.

This Sunday, Lit honcho and excellent artist Erik Foss will present his solo show, *Avarice*. I saw many of these new works at his Broadway studio when the weather was wet and cold, and I was left speechless—not an easy thing to do to me. The opening reception will be held this Sunday, September 11th at Malick Williams & Co. I won't tell you too much as I am a little speechless just thinking about the enormity and power of this work, but it is 9/11 related and a must see.

Moving off of the fashion week tip, I chatted with The Meatball Shop proprietor, friend and former employee Michael Chernow, at his newish Bedford Avenue restaurant.

#### **It's Michael now, you've grown up**

Yes, I moved on to Michael. As you know, I started out as Mickey or Little Mickey when you met me.

#### **What jobs did you do for me back then?**

I started handing out flyers and doing all the mailings, then you made me a barback.

#### **Barbacks made a lot of money back then?**

Yes, sir. 3fucking 50 a night.

#### **That was good money for Little Mickey, but now you own The Meatball Shop. There's one on Stanton Street and now we're sitting in the newish one on Bedford Avenue, and you're opening another on Greenwich and Perry Street. When did meatballs become something important in your life?**

It wasn't necessarily a meatball thing; it was a food and hospitality thing. I started as a kid. As you know, I started in restaurants and clubs when I was thirteen years old. I've always had this passion for hospitality and the service industry; it kind of just spoke to me. I'm not a sit behind the computer kind of guy. In the eight years before opening The Meatball Shop in 2009, I worked at this Italian place, where I loved the food and believed in the product. They served awesome meatballs. Late night, every night, I would order a bowl of meatballs with broccoli and spinach on the side. Everybody use to break my chops about it like "Oh, you don't eat the pasta", and I was said, "I like the meatballs!" I guess at that point it became a big part of my diet. And I had this dream of opening a restaurant with my partner Daniel Holzman. He and I grew up together and I had been trying to coerce him back to the city to open up this restaurant with me.



### **How did it progress from there?**

We found this cool space on Bowery with a little side window and I had a late night concept for it. It was right next to a really busy bar and there would always be people smoking cigarettes and talking outside, and I'm thinking: "How am I going to feed these people?" I wanted to do something cheap, easy, and delicious and I thought about meatballs. No one was doing meatballs. No one was actually executing meatballs. That's what spawned this concept. Daniel and I began cooking meatball after meatball coming up with cool recipes and once that restaurant fell through, I thought—well, fuck it, let's dive into this meatball thing and see if it can come into fruition. So we started cooking more meatballs and invited people over for meatball dinners.

### **How did ice cream end up on the menu?**

We wrote up a business plan and people thought we were crazy. I love ice cream, so I thought it would be good to keep the dessert aspect and make it simple and familiar with meatballs and ice cream sandwiches. I grew up eating Klondike bars, so I wanted to make our own ice cream sandwiches and cookies, then we could do a mix-and-match ice cream bar for dessert. When we wrote up the business plan and presented it to people, the thought we were nuts. When you hear it, it doesn't sound like something that would actually work, but if it would work, New York City would be the place to do it. Enough people believed in me, threw some capital my way, and I was off. I went out looking for spaces on Stanton Street. The minute I walked in there, the restaurant we were in was dead. You've been in the industry a long time—there are just some spaces that are continually turned over every year, eight months, or less, six months, but I just got this really good feeling. Though it was beyond our means, as far as rent was concerned, we took the leap and opened up. And the day we opened up, we had 150 people in line waiting to get in.

### **What are the differences between the Stanton Street and Bedford Avenue locations?**

In Brooklyn we've been able to lock down a full liquor license, so we've incorporated this really cool cocktail program. We have five mix-ins and five spirits, and all the mix-ins work perfectly with the spirits, very similar to the Slider Grid that we have, in which you choose your sauce. You choose your spirit and the mix-ins; we make the cocktail for you. We've gotten amazing feedback from the cocktail program. They're not super fancy cocktails, no guys with mustaches and suspenders behind the bar, just simple cocktails that are really delicious. It's our newest concept and we're really excited about it. We've definitely taken on a bigger space. While Stanton Street is 1,700 square feet, here we also have a basement so we're able to minimize the back of house on the main floor. We've got a ton of seats here, but they still stay full. We opened up in the summer time, which is typically the slowest time of the year, but we're neck-and-neck with Stanton Street right now.



**Over on Greenwich and Perry might be different with lots of families over there.**

Yes, we're going to hang strollers all the way down the staircase; we've already got that planned out—we've got hooks on the walls. I'm really interested to see what happens over there. Meatballs are fun and familiar for everyone. At a meatball place, you see a 3-year-old and a 75-year-old with the same plate of food in front of them. It's just familiar food that everyone gets and understands. It shouldn't work any differently with affluent people; in the West Village people have a little bit more money and they go to bed a little earlier.

**Tell me about The Meatball Shop Skateboard series.**

I grew up in NYC and I grew up skateboarding. Ever since I was 5-years old, I had this dream of owning my own skateboard. The Meatball Shop caught a little bit of cred and I approached **Shut Skateboards**, which is right around the corner from The Meatball Shop on the LES. I've known a lot of those guys for a number of years, so I said, "What do you think of doing a little collaboration?" Skaters come to the shop all the time and they're always in the restaurant. I had this idea that we would call it the "Superhero." This big picture of a meatball hero at the bottom of the deck and they loved it, so we brought in a photographer. It actually took a year to come into fruition because it's hard to get a good picture. We've also got a cookbook that's coming out in December and we had this amazing photographer shoot for the book and so we used one of the shoots for the skateboard and it looks awesome.

**Do celebrities eat meatballs?**

We've had a bunch of celebrities. It's actually somewhat of a haunt for some celebs.

**OMG! Who?**

Ryan Seacrest, Tyra Banks—I remember barbacking for Tyra at Life, she's a super cool chick, super professional and really nice to work with. Adrien Brody, it's his regular spot and we get a bunch of hip-hop groups and different bands.

**Will this concept work in Chicago, Philly, and LA? Are you going to open a thousand of these?**

I think realistically you can drop this anywhere. It's inexpensive and the product is awesome. We just use diligence to make sure we've got the best ingredients. We get our food from purveyors that all of the 4-star restaurants use. And I think that if you drop a meatball in front of anybody in any country in the world they know what it is.

**What's your personal favorite?**

I love the spicy pork meatballs but since I eat at The Meatball shop 365 days a year, I do veggie balls every day. They're awesome, delicious and healthy. But if I'm going for the fences, I do spicy balls! Meatballs make people smile. When we first opened I would walk up to tables and just say "meatball" and the whole table would smile.

*Photo Credit: Hannah Williams*